

Johnston Economic Development Corporation

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Paula Dierenfeld, Mayor
Jim Sanders, City Manager
David Wilwerding, Community Development Director
City of Johnston
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Mayor Dierenfeld, Jim, and David,

On behalf of the members of the Johnston Economic Development Corporation, I wish to thank you for the planning that has occurred during these past months as the Johnston Thrive 2040 Comprehensive Plan has been developed. During this period, we have strongly encouraged the development community and our members to engage in the planning process. COVID-19 disrupted face-to-face opportunities for communications, but the City staff and consulting team adapted quickly, and we believe the virtual or online engagement methods were effective. It can truly be said that everyone had numerous opportunities to provide input and express an opinion.

As the planning process draws to a close, we wish to take this opportunity to address a few important portions of the plan which merit emphasis.

Land Use

Land Use is obviously a central theme for any comprehensive plan. The City staff and consulting team have incorporated some new elements in the Land Use categories, and we wish to express our support for these changes. Specifically, the incorporation of the Suburban residential category and the increased flexibility in the range of units per acre should be welcomed by housing developers. We agree with the statement on page 121 that the “Johnston Thrive 2040 land use plan introduces a wider range of land uses to allow for housing diversity accommodating market demand and supporting broader economic development needs of the city. This density range allows the integration of townhouse developments with traditional single-family detached housing neighborhoods.”

We also believe that the inclusion of both the community mixed use and neighborhood mixed use categories (drawing a distinction in the character of nodes less than 10 acres - neighborhood mixed use - and nodes greater than 10 acres - community mixed use) makes sense and provides developers with greater flexibility. These changes both refine and elevate the land use categories, and we hope these subtle changes will lead to more and better developments for Johnston.

We also wish to express support for the creation of the “Employment” category, replacing the Business Park category and encompassing both professional office space along with showrooms, warehousing and light industrial uses. This is a sensible change that will also provide developers and the City with greater flexibility.

This is particularly important with respect to the focus area labeled as NW Area East, as depicted on page 73. Interest is growing in this area, and we strongly encourage the City and partner organizations to resolve any uncertainties and move forward with plans to extend water, sewer, and power to this area. We would also support expanding the scope of work for the Highway 141 master transportation plan to include the area to the south, specifically the roadways adjacent to the Beaver Creek Golf course and extending to 78th Avenue. Further planning for a northward extension of a minor collector road into the area also merits consideration.

For marketing purposes, it may also be beneficial to change the title of this area to something that will be easier to communicate. Something like the “Beaver Creek Development Region” might be more effective than NW Area East or the NW Annexation area.

Recommendations for the other focus areas are sensible and practical. An emergent focus area worthy of review is the southwest area of Birchwood Crossing. With the closure of the Burger King and Village Inn, this location and the adjacent commercial development should receive additional attention for redevelopment and possibly enhanced incentives, even if the comprehensive plan and current zoning regulations remain applicable.

Housing

We wish to express our strong support for the stated goal to “Maintain a balanced housing supply with housing available for people at all income levels and unit types that meet the varying life-cycle needs of Johnston residents.” We understand that some may be concerned with higher density housing and apartments, but to support our community’s economy a diversity of housing is important.

We would call out one Housing implementation item for discussion. Item 5 on page 119 states: “Build partnerships with lending institutions to provide grants or low interest or zero interest loan programs aimed at modernizing, improving, or maintaining older housing stock in Johnston.” This did not receive much attention in the planning process. We are sure that the community financial institutions which are part of the Johnston Economic Development family will want to discuss this further. They will have many questions about the guidelines for participation, and they will likely need to apply typical underwriting processes to evaluate risk. We will be pleased to assist the City with further conversations on this topic.

Economic Development

We wish to express our appreciation for the statements in this section, highlighting the role of the Johnston Economic Development Corporation (JEDCO) in supporting economic growth in the Johnston community. We believe that a public/private partnerships makes the strongest economic development program. JEDCO has worked hard to incrementally build our capacity to promote and support development in Johnston. We believe that resources provided by our private sector partners and through the City of Johnston is an investment in supporting the smart growth sought through the Thrive 2040 plan.

We support the broad goals and policies enumerated in the economic development section of the plan. We also wish to express support for the policies and implementation actions which are specified, including actions to aggregate property to facilitate organized development. With a collaborative spirit we offer the following additional comments.

- The financial incentive toolbox referenced in item 4 on page 109 should continue to be evaluated and compared with the tools being used by other communities in the greater Des Moines region. This implementation action should be modified to read “Maintain a competitive financial incentive policy and “economic development toolbox” ...
- The Thrive 2040 document should acknowledge that there is an established City brand (Thrive in Johnston) and marketing plan (Grow Johnston). The implementation action

- (item 11) should be to enhance the marketing plan and to invest more in marketing activities through our public/private partnership.
- The Thrive 2040 document should acknowledge that there is an established business retention and expansion program. The implementation action (item 12) should be to enhance the program and to invest more in marketing activities through our public/private partnership.

Parks, Trails and Recreation and Natural Resources

The Johnston Economic Development Corporation continues to support investment in amenities that contribute to a high quality of life, making the community attractive to both business and residents. We were proud to be among the supporters and investors in Terra Park. In addition to our natural resources in the Beaver Creek area, one of our biggest recreational assets is our trail system. We wish to express our support for continuing to develop a trail system that is well connected within the community as well as with our regional trail systems. We look forward to the completion of the Johnston Town Center and the "Yard", and we commend the City for joining in partnership with Ignit to create more recreational opportunities for our residents and workforce.

Overview

We are fortunate to have City leadership and staff who are forward thinking and committed to "smart" development while also recognizing the practical and economic needs of the entrepreneurs and developers investing in the community. We look forward to continuing our public/private partnership with the City of Johnston, and we stand ready to participate in the planning and decision-making that will help implement the policies and goals for this updated Johnston Thrive 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

Best regards,



Phil Dunshee
Director

cc: Johnston City Council
Johnston Planning and Zoning Commission
Brad Scheib
Adam Plagge